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Book review: The identities and practices of high-achieving pupils: negotiating achievement and peer culture by B. Francis, C. Skelton and B. Read

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The identities and practices of high achieving pupils: negotiating achievement and peer cultures.
By Francis, B., Skelton, C. and Read, B. Pp. 209. London: Continuum. 2012. £75.00 (hbk), £24.99 (pbk). ISBN: 9781441157195 (hbk), 9781441121561 (pbk).

In a recent BBC *Horizon* programme about the complex algorithmic manipulation of enormous datasets, the founder of the first financial data-mining company in the City of London told a joke about the 'quants' in his company. 'The question is: What do you call a nerd in twenty years' time? Answer: "Boss".' The experiences of nerds and other high achievers in the early years of secondary school form the focus of this book. The school lives of such pupils can be markedly different from their eventual adult successes, and represent an under-researched area in the scholarship on adolescent peer cultures. There is added justification for research in this area, given the policy emphasis on 'high ability' or 'gifted and talented' learners in the past decade and a half.

Drawing on research from an ESRC-funded project on gender and high achievers, Francis, Skelton and Read analyse the complex ways in which such pupils balance their academic and social identities and relationships. The researchers conducted ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with a sample of 71 Year 8 pupils (12-13 year-olds) in 9 English schools selected to represent a diverse range of location, socio-economic profile, ethnic mix, and recorded achievement. Their analysis relies heavily on poststructuralist feminist gender theory, especially the work of Judith Butler and her successors on gender performances.

What the researchers found was that, even given the schools' varied profiles and ethos, there were distinct camps into which the high achievers in each school fell: the popular and the unpopular (with popularity defined as a pupil's prestige, influence and high regard among peers – and sometimes also adults – in the classroom). The popular achievers' social success depended on a combination of personal attractiveness, fashionability, and the skills and demanding 'identity work' required to balance their social personas with the diligence needed for academic success. Their self-constructions were highly gendered and maintained at high costs in terms of personal energy and commitment. There was even a subset of such pupils that the researchers termed 'alphas' due to their notably high levels of status and influence. Unpopular high achievers lacked the interest and/or resources (physical attributes, social skills, access to high-status consumer brands) required for social success. The terrain of acceptable gender performance was ruthlessly policed by peer culture in the classroom. The penalties of non-popularity for high achievers involved gender-specific versions of pariah status, with boys denigrated as 'gay', and girls dismissed as asexual.

This is a highly theorised book, so it is appropriate to consider the salience of the theory employed, and the articulation among theory, empirical data, and context. Generally theory is deployed 'top-down' rather than 'bottom up', with pre-existing theory being applied to illuminate the research context and empirical findings, rather than findings being used to generate theory. The authors argue convincingly that the recent educational context – including high-stakes testing, league tables, and the 'gifted and talented' initiative – arises from a wider neoliberal project that defines individuals as atomised competitors in a climate of Social Darwinism. Their use of Butlerian gender theory, specifically notions of the performativity and fluidity of gender constructions, is generally elucidating and helpful. Some of the more abstruse aspects of Butler's thinking, such as the claim that sex as well as gender is socially constructed, happily fall away when the discussion turns to analysis of the empirical findings.

It is interesting that, in a book whose argument hinges on defining gender and 'race' (whose contested nature is indicated throughout by the scrupulous use of quotation marks) as fluid, contingent and performed, there should be such an uncritical stance on hegemonic views of social class. Individual pupils are coded wherever possible as being either 'middle' or 'working' class, with no explanation of what information or 'data' the researchers used to make this identification. Occasionally the authors lament the fact that there is no class attribution available for a particular pupil, sometimes because the school withheld this information. While an uncritical, almost essentialist, acceptance of hegemonic class delineations is normal practice in nearly all educational research, it would be refreshing to encounter a work where such categories, surely at least as much a socio-cultural construction as gender, were as intensively interrogated and deconstructed. If 'gender' and 'race' are up for grabs, why not 'class' – especially when considering young people, whose identities and self-constructions are in a particularly turbulent state of flux?

A gap in the book is its cursory attention to the more factual aspects of the 'gifted and talented' initiative in New Labour's educational policy (the context in which the research took place), including the attendant guidance to schools and the ways this played out in practice. A more informed grounding in this, for example, might have allowed the authors to situate their observation (p. 57) that 'what was seen to constitute "high achieving" differed from school to school' in the policy landscape (it was an explicit requirement in the government's 'gifted and talented' guidance) as well as using it to bolster their arguments about the slipperiness of 'achievement' as a concept.

Similarly, the authors decline to engage with the scholarship on 'gifted and talented' education. Their discussion simply ignores the extensive body of literature in this area, including the work of heavyweights such as Robert Sternberg and Joseph Renzulli, both leaders of longstanding efforts to theorise, as well as operationalise, 'defensible' and equitable approaches. The tendency to dissociate from this type of scholarship is typical of many progressive academic educationalists in Britain, motivated no doubt by memories of the damage arising from the selective schooling system in operation until the 1970s. (It may also result from disciplinary hostilities in play in the field of educational studies, for example between sociologists and cognitive psychologists.) In any case, such dismissiveness has meant that the recent phenomenon of the 'gifted and talented' agenda is only just beginning to receive serious scholarly attention, albeit peripherally. When it does, as here, the tendency to treat the policy context and the scholarship that informed it as regrettable side issues closes off opportunities to interrogate how these powerful drivers have interacted with other aspects of the educational environment, such as peer culture.

In discussing the implications of their research for practice, the authors emphasise the need for serious attention to the social relationships in classrooms and their consequences for high achieving pupils (both those who are popular and those who are not). Some of their recommendations for practice invoke familiar aspects of good schools (whole-school approaches, good leadership, shared values, effective teaching and learning), indicating yet again that these features are far easier to identify than to achieve. However they also make a number of more targeted recommendations, including the avoidance of gender-specific teaching and learning approaches and the downplaying of 'oppositional gender binaries' in both teacher attitudes and peer culture. The lists of framework questions for schools and teachers (pp 177-181) are particularly useful.

Despite a few blind spots, this book is a welcome addition to the already sizeable corpus of work on gender in education, produced jointly and severally by Francis, Skelton and Read. Their analysis of the gendered identity and interpersonal dynamics in secondary-school peer culture, and the ways in which self-presentation and social relationships are successfully or unsuccessfully integrated with academic work by high-achieving pupils, represents a genuine and original contribution to the scholarship in the field.

Reference

David Harding in BBC *Horizon: The Big Data Revolution* (broadcast 4 April 2013).

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